Pedagogical Practices in the Production of the Third-Person Singular Morpheme[1]

(Prácticas pedagógicas en la producción del morfema de la tercera persona singular)

Deykel Dyalá Garita Gómez[2]
Ministerio de Educación Pública, Heredia, Costa Rica

ABSTRACT

Spaced Learning is implemented to prompt oral production of the third-person singular *–s* by Spanish EFL learners. This quantitative study involved three experimental groups and a control group. The experimental groups received differentiated instruction (form-focused, meaning-focused, and a combination of both) in which the technique is embedded. The data were coded and analyzed with the obligatory occasion analysis method and an ANOVA test. Results show that Spaced Learning combined with form-focused and meaning-focused instruction prompted the oral production of the morpheme. Consequently, it is recommended to use, but not complement, the tenants of each instruction in the EFL classroom.

RESUMEN

Se pone en práctica el aprendizaje espaciado para fomentar la producción oral de la tercera persona del singular, en estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera. Este estudio cuantitativo considera tres grupos experimentales y uno controlado. Los experimentales

reciben instrucción diferenciada (centrada en forma, significado y una combinación) en la que se incorpora la técnica de estudio. Se utiliza el análisis de ocasiones obligatorias y un ANOVA para la codificación y análisis de datos. Los resultados indican que el aprendizaje espaciado con instrucción basada en forma y en significado favorece a la producción oral del morfema. Por ello, se recomienda usar, pero no complementar, los elementos de las instrucciones en la clase de inglés como lengua extranjera.

Keywords: acquisition, education, Spaced Learning, instruction, English learning
Palabras clave: adquisición, educación, aprendizaje distribuido, instrucción, aprendizaje del inglés

Introduction

Difficulties in the use and the eventual acquisition of the third-person singular morpheme are persistent in learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). EFL teachers often complain that although L2 learners receive instruction since the early stages of their language learning process, most of them struggle to use the structure correctly upon completing basic English programs. Traditionally, EFL teachers resort to diagrams or patterns to explain on the board that the first-person singular (I and we) and the second-person singular as well as the second-person plural (you) use the simple form of verbs while the third-person singular (he, she, and it) use an –s at the end of the verb. After instruction, most learners may be able to recite this so-called formula by memory or by doing traditional structure-based exercises but might still struggle to incorporate it into oral discourse. In his Natural Order hypothesis, Krashen[3] referred to the difficulties learners have with this morpheme as one of the last linguistic features EFL learners acquire. In the same vein, he affirmed that "learning a rule does not always mean being able to use it in performance, even

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3   Stephen Krashen, *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1982).

when conditions are favorable."[4] Following rules and memorizing patterns, therefore, appear to be deficient practices for morpheme acquisition and production.

This phenomenon triggers the inquiry of what is required for learners to internalize and use the third-person singular *–s* in their oral discourse after years of instruction. EFL teachers should foresee the linguistic delay learners may have when producing the third-person singular morpheme according to Krashen's Natural Order hypothesis. Hence, it is a pedagogical responsibility to search for techniques and approaches to help learners not only to understand and memorize the rules, but also implement them in everyday speech. Castro-García[5] described a situation that is relatable to the reality of EFL learners in Costa Rica: "we [teachers] have witnessed students cram for tests, perform the given task and then have no recollection whatsoever of the material a few days or weeks after the test took place."[6] In other words, most learners study to pass tests but not to acquire knowledge in the long term. She added that this is a *massed learning* technique, and the opposite is *Spaced Learning*, defined as the "practice of distributing and revisiting information presented in separate time intervals with the purpose of facilitating the storage of this information in the long-term memory."[7] Massed learning along with the Natural Order hypothesis may explain why learners remember the structure right after instruction but might eventually forget it. Thus, Spaced Learning may be considered as a potential technique to aid in closing the proficiency delay learners have between memorizing and using the linguistic feature orally.

Searching for and implementing different pedagogical techniques and instruction can facilitate the production and acquisition of linguistic elements that may not be internalized by EFL learners.

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4   Krashen, 115.
5   Damaris Castro-García, "Spaced Learning: Its Implications in the Language Classroom," *Revista de Lenguas Modernas* 20 (2014): 242-257.
6   Castro-García, 243.
7   Castro-García, 242.

The downside of teaching the language in the same traditional ways (e.g., teacher centered, drills, and memorization) without inquiring and implementing innovative or different techniques is expecting little or no change. Albert Einstein insisted that it is insane for people to keep doing things the same old ways and expect different results. Language teachers should constantly search for practices that are favorable for students, to implement them in trial-and-error processes.

This study provides insights into the effectiveness of Spaced Learning (SP) with form-focused instruction (FFI), meaning-focused instruction (MFI), and mixed-focused instruction (FFI + MFI) to test the effectiveness of SP as a pedagogical technique in the EFL classroom. It also investigates whether these combinations facilitate students' oral production of the singular –s morpheme. The results derived from the experiment do not imply that the pedagogical techniques and approaches presented are the only ones to be used, but rather aim to illustrate how different techniques can bolster the EFL learning process.

The following section presents an account of the different studies and approaches to form-focused and meaning-focused instruction, as well as studies which have addressed them as a mixed approach. In addition, information is provided on Spaced Learning and on research that has explored its effectiveness.

Instruction Methods

Form-Focused Instruction

The concepts focus on form (FonF) and form-focused instruction (FFI) have often been used interchangeably as they were thought to be synonyms.[8] However, Long[9] had differentiated between the concepts arguing that "the latter is an umbrella term widely used to

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8   James C. Jensen, "Focus on Form and the Communicative Classroom," *Kinki University Department of Language Education Journal* 4 (2008): 75-89.
9   Michael H. Long, "Focus on Form in Task-Based Language Teaching," *University of Hawai'i Working Papers in ESL* 16, 2 (1998): 35-49.

refer to any pedagogical technique, proactive or reactive, implicit or explicit, used to draw students' attention to language forms" while the former includes form-oriented activities embedded in sudden and unexpected meaningful contexts.[10]

Similar to Long, Spada defined FFI as "any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners' attention to form either implicitly or explicitly."[11] Form-focused instruction encompasses different types of pedagogical practices depending on its approach whether the focus is on form (FonF) or on forms (FonFs). According to Shintani[12] FonF is more oriented towards function and encourages learners to notice target language features, especially gaps between their own performance and L2 norms while FonFS is a more traditional and linear instruction where attention to form is primary. Rod Ellis explained that FonF was originally described as an approach which now has become a set of procedures; he described four different types of FonF: text-enhancement, corrective feedback, pre-task planning, and task-repetition, being corrective feedback the type most addressed in research; in addition, "pre-task planning and task-repetition have been shown to influence how learners orientate to the performance of a communicative task and impact on the complexity of the language involved."[13] Attention has been given to the enduring effect that pre-task (predicting, looking for words and definitions, choosing vocabulary and phrases) and task-repetition have on the performance of communicative tasks, and to the implications they have in the complexity of the language that learners use.[14]

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10 Long, 39.
11 Nina Spada, "Form-Focused Instruction and Second Language Acquisition: A Review of Classroom and Laboratory Research," *Language Teaching* 30, 2 (1997): 73-87 (73). DOI: 10.1017/S0261444800012799.
12 Natsuko Shintani, "The Effect of Focus on Form and Focus on Forms Instruction on the Acquisition of Productive Knowledge of L2 Vocabulary by Young Beginning-Level Learners," *TESOL Quarterly* 47, 1 (2013): 36-62.
13 Rod Ellis, "Focus on Form: A Critical Review. Language Teaching Research," *Sage Journals* 20, 3 (2016): 405-428 (423). DOI: 10.1177/136216881662862.
14 R. Ellis, 419.

Numerous studies sustain the effectiveness of implementing FFI along with explicit techniques. Nick Ellis analyzed the role of noticing and attention in the initial acquisition of constructions, the effectiveness of form-focused instruction, and explicit and implicit learning, and emphasized that "grammatical meaning-form relationships are both salient and essential to understanding the meaning of an utterance (...) others, such as grammatical particles and many morphological inflections like that third- person singular –s in English, are not."[15] He recommended using form-focused and explicit instruction so that learners would become aware of those almost-imperceptible linguistic features.

Similarly, Valeo[16] tested the benefits that explicit FFI has on language acquisition. She carried out a quasi-experimental study on two adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL)[17] groups. "In the instruction to the FF[I] group, the tasks also included instructions reminding the learners to pay attention to grammatical accuracy, and the teacher modeled a correct form verbally or in writing when assigning the task."[18] Valeo argues that, in most instances, FFI has been beneficial, and evidence supports that explicit attention to form has outcomes better than focusing exclusively on meaning and communication; she also recommends FFI practices such as "modified input, tasks designed to draw attention to form, and the provision of corrective feedback."[19]

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15 Nick C. Ellis, "Usage-Based and Form-Focused SLA: The Implicit and Explicit Learning of Constructions," *Language in the Context of Use: Discourse and Cognitive Approaches to Language* (New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 2008) 93-120 (106). DOI: 10.1515/9783110199123.1.93.

16 Antonella Valeo, "The Integration of Language and Content: Form-Focused Instruction in a Content-Based Language Program*," The Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 16, 1 (2013): 25-50.

17 Hans Heinrich Stern, *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) 16. For this author, ESL stands for English as a Second Language and deals with learning a non-native language that is used within the country and has an official status, while EFL stands for English as a Foreign language, and it is used outside the national boundaries with the aims of traveling abroad, scientific work, among others.

18 Valeo, 31.

19 Valeo, 27.

As seen above, form and meaning are not necessarily opposing approaches. In fact, Jensen discussed the need to implement form-focused activities in communicative classes, and asserted that MFI "could be improved with some attention to grammatical form."[20] He argued that FFI has become popular for an adequate balance between form and meaning instruction since "it validates the occasional incorporation of non-communicative elements because experience has revealed that repetition, drilling, and error correction can aid learning."[21] More precisely, FFI fosters using the language for communicating as well as for overcoming errors. Due to the effectiveness of previous studies, FFI is proposed as a potential method to achieve the objectives mentioned earlier.

Meaning-Focused Instruction

As stated above, it is commonly believed that form-focused instruction is merely concerned with grammar, and that meaning-focused instruction is simply meaning and communication disregarding form. However, the studies below provide a clear account on the range of MFI. Regarding the definition of MFI, Çelik[22] described it as "the basis of communicative approaches and, in fact, it was a reaction to traditional rule-based, grammar-bound teaching methods."[23] MFI implies giving learners abundant input where the target linguistic feature is presented within different contexts, so that learners incidentally interact with the target linguistic feature. Çelik explained that MFI allows learners to choose the linguistic structures from their own repertoire to complete communicative tasks. In his quantitative study, he observed the effects of extensive reading with MFI and intensive reading with the FFI on the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar. Results showed

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20 Jensen, 75.
21 Jensen, 77.
22 Bunyamin Çelik, "A Comparison of Form-Focused and Meaning-Focused Instruction Types: A Study on Ishik University Students in Erbil, Iraq," *International Journal of English Linguistics* 9, 1 (2018): 201-228. DOI: 10.5539/ijel.v9n1p201.
23 Çelik (2018), 204.

the learners' improvement from implementing both types of instruction; however, FFI improved the learners' weekly performance while MFI had an impact on weekly examinations. Çelik claimed that FFI is more beneficial for upper-intermediate and advanced learners while MFI is more appropriate for beginners. In a previous study, Çelik[24] concluded that MFI and FFI are equally advantageous since "there is no meaning without form."[25] The author strongly recommended applying both pedagogical approaches "to involve the linguistic, communicative and psychological comfort for students."[26]

Effective communication is one of the ultimate goals of learning a second language. Thus, focusing on meaning instead of form has influenced pedagogical practices in recent years. This also responds to the shift from the Direct Method and Grammar-translation method to more communicative ones. As R. Ellis has noted, Long (1997) had conceptualized focus on meaning (FonM) as "an approach to teaching that emphasized incidental and implicit language learning through content-based instruction or immersion programs where the learners' focus [is] more or less entirely on meaning."[27] Long had explained how a focus on meaning emerges as a necessary shift where the primary concern is the learner and learning processes rather than the language forms per se; he also had described meaning-focused activities as purely communicative, where grammar is implicit and incidental[28]. However, he did affirm that focusing on meaning is not entirely efficient since its results are evident in slow processes and there is no guarantee that learners will acquire non-salient linguistic aspects. Besides, MFI can enhance learners' fluency in the target language while hindering accuracy.

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24 Bunyamin Çelik, "Comparing the Effectiveness of Form-Focused and Meaning-Focused Instructions in EFL Teaching," *Journal of Education in Black Sea Region* 1, 1 (2015): 5-15. DOI: 10.31578/jebs.v1i1.4.

25 Çelik (2015), 14.

26 Çelik (2015), 15.

27 R. Ellis (2016), 406.

28 Michael H. Long, *Focus on Form in Task-Based Teaching* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997).

Lesson planning is also a concern when referring to MFI. Tomlinson described MFI as an approach recommended by methodologists and material developers due to its background and evidence in the SLA field, but "rarely put into practice in classrooms or coursebooks because of its lack of face validity with administrators, teachers and students who believe in the explicit teaching and learning of languages."[29] He claimed that this represents a problem for learners because they are exposed either to forms selected from a syllabus and organized in a presentation, practice, production (PPP) lesson format, or to "focus on form in focus-on-meaning approach (such as TBLT) in which the focus is almost exclusively on semantic meanings and pragmatic meanings are rarely encountered."[30] The author proposed implementing the stages of the text-driven meaning-focused approaches to address this problem.

The literature reviewed shows that the effectiveness of both methods—FFI and MFI—is supported by theory and investigations; nonetheless, they have weak areas that can be strengthened by complementing one another, rather than separating them. Several researchers and material developers[31] favor the implementation of mixed method instruction (FFI + MFI), which can lead to a more effective SLA process. According to these studies, FFI is highly beneficial for remembering linguistic aspects, correcting possible mistakes, and making learning enduring. On the other hand, the communicative stage of using those improved language forms is prompted by the inclusion of MFI techniques. Theory supports that neither type of instruction (MFI and FFI) should be excluded from the other since the functions

29   Brian Tomlinson, "What Should Meaning-Focused Mean?," *Meaning-Focused Materials for Language Learning* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2018) 5-17 (5).

30   Tomlinson, 11.

31   Çelik (2018); Jensen (2018); Çağrı Tuğrul Mart, "A Comparison of Form-Focused, Content-Based and Mixed Approaches to Literature-Based Instruction to Develop Learners' Speaking Skills," *Cogent Education* 6, 1 (2019): 1-27. DOI: 10.1080/2331186X.2019.1660526; Pawel Szudarski, "Effects of Meaning-and Form-Focused Instruction on the Acquisition of Verb-Noun Collocations in L2," *English Journal of Second Language Teaching & Research* 1, 2 (2012): 3-37; and Tomlinson (2018).

each fulfills in language production and its eventual acquisition are different, and one cannot take over the function of the other.

Spaced Learning

Spaced Learning, also known as distributed practice or spaced review, is a strategy that consists of studying and waiting during set time intervals before re-studying target content. The spacing effect is the result of the application of this strategy. It is also defined as the tendency to recall information more effectively when learners use spaced repetition practice instead of massed practice.[32] The psychologist Ebbinghaus[33] originally introduced the spacing effect concept for neurocognition, stating that the efficacy of Spaced Learning lies on the fact that information might easily be forgotten; but when information is reviewed several times, it becomes easier to retrieve.

Castro-García provided a detailed account of the benefits that Spaced Learning has in the language classroom due to its effect on retention, and defined Spaced Learning as "the practice of distributing and revisiting information presented in separate time intervals to facilitate the storage of this information in the long-term memory."[34] She explained the advantages that Spaced Learning implied in the short, long, episodic, and semantic memory; the role of metacognition; and its pedagogical implications in the EFL setting. Castro-García justified the implementation of Spaced Learning in the EFL classroom since it is essential to provide students with different opportunities through time to understand, learn and acquire different linguistic forms that might result difficult when they were first introduced. In addition, she mentioned the positive outcomes of implementing Spaced Learning in the EFL classroom. First, Spaced Learning improves memory

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32 Burr Settles and Brendan Meeder, "A Trainable Spaced Repetition Model for Language Learning," *Proceedings of the 54th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics* (Berlín: The Association for Computational Linguistics, 2016) 1848-1858.

33 Hermann Ebbinghaus, "Retention as a Function of Repeated Learning," *Memory: A Contribution to Experimental* Psychology (1885), Henry A. Ruger and Clara E. Bussenius, trans. (New York: Teachers College Columbia University, 1913): 81-89.

34 Castro-García, 247.

performance. Second, it "enhances the ability to recall [...] by showing better item recognition and longer maintenance of information in memory."[35] Third, it provides opportunities for rehearsal, which facilitates the retrieval of information. Lastly, acquisition is stimulated when learners are exposed to feedback and favorable conditions. In other words, Spaced Learning is a flexible, effective technique that enhances long term learning and retrieval of information if implemented appropriately.

In a similar vein, Son and Simon[36] explained the spacing effect and the importance Spaced Learning has when aiming for long-term memory, and what that means in the educational context. The authors defined Spaced Learning as the strategy of studying and re-studying at different intervals. To incorporate this strategy, they recommended five steps: implementing review sessions, including a variety of contexts, managing time effectively, promoting learners' autonomy in their learning process, and summarizing. Having analyzed the main tenants of Spaced Learning, it is useful to introduce previous studies that have tested the effectiveness of technique and implications in the language classroom.

Spaced Learning: Previous Studies

An account is given here of four previous quantitative studies using Spaced Learning strategy in the grammar and vocabulary fields. In addition, previous results and recommendations to enhance its efficacy are listed.

Bloom and Shuell[37] compared the effects of massed and distributed practice on high school students when learning vocabulary in French as a second language. The participants were fifty-six randomly

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35 Castro-García, 255.
36 Lisa K. Son and Dominic A. Simon, "Distributed Learning: Data, Metacognition, and Educational Implications*," Educational Psychological Review* 24 (2012): 379- 399.
37 Kristine C. Bloom and Thomas J. Shuellm, "Effects of Massed and Distributed Practice on the Learning and Retention of Second-Language Vocabulary*," The Journal of Educational Research* 74, 4 (1981): 245-248.

assigned students of French. The researchers divided participants equally into two groups which received different treatment: massed practice (MP) and distributed practice (DP). The treatment was comprised of three written exercises: one multiple choice and two fill-in-the-gaps activities. A delayed posttest was administered four days later without prior notice. When analyzing the pretest results, Bloom and Shuell explained that there was no significant difference between DP and MP groups, but the posttest results showed that performance of the DP participants was 35% better than that of the MP participants. The statistical method used to analyze the data was a 2x2 analysis of variance, considering two levels of practice (massed and distributed) and two-time intervals (pre-and posttest). Bloom and Shuell affirmed that their study was pioneering in testing that distributed practice could be implemented in a natural classroom setting instead of a laboratory as their predecessors did. These researchers highlighted that DP might be beneficial to retrieve information in the long term instead of recalling it just for tests, and recommended delaying feedback as a strategy to incorporate distributed practice in the language classroom.

Bird[38] investigated the effects of Spaced Learning in the acquisition of English syntax. He aimed to discover whether distributed practice provided learners with the ability to differentiate when to use the different grammatical structures such as simple past, present perfect, and past perfect tenses. The participants in this case study were 38 young adult English learners enrolled in the business major, whose native language was Malay. The results showed that "distributed learning conditions yielded better long-term retention of what had been learned during the study phase."[39] Bird affirmed that the results are supported by the psychology literature that implies that "that distributed practice can have a beneficial effect on long-term

38   Steve Bird, "Effects of Distributed Practice on the Acquisition of Second Language English Syntax," *Applied Psycholinguistics* 31, 4 (2010): 635-650. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716410000172.

39   Bird, 648.

learning across a variety of information and skill types."[40] The most salient conclusion Bird reached was that the ability to produce accurate grammatical sentences can be developed by intensive instruction.

Hoshino[41] explored the factors that influence the acquisition of the third-person singular morpheme with which most learners struggle to learn and produce. The prevailing pedagogical implication drawn from the study was that "explicit grammar instruction could be effective to a certain extent, especially when one combined [*sic*] it with corrective feedback and Spaced Learning."[42] This scholar also noticed that one possible difficulty in understanding and using the third-person singular deals with confusion between that morpheme and the plural nouns, "when he [the participant] saw the third-person singular –*s* verb inflection, he often incorrectly assumed that it was for plural use; thus, he sometimes considered the subject to be plural."[43] Hoshino concluded that learners might not use the third-person singular morpheme until its function is completely clear, and it is not confused with other functions such as plural marking. The author strongly argued that explicit instruction along with the use of corrective feedback can foster morpheme acquisition.

Namaziandost and others[44] replicated the study by Bloom and Shuell to analyze the impact Spaced Learning has on learning vocabulary and to discover whether spaced and massed distribution instruction could help learners improve their vocabulary. The authors worked with an experimental study with 68 intermediate EFL participants and implemented two different types of instruction. They divided the

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40 Bird, 649.
41 Hanae Hoshino, "A Case Study: The Use of the Third Person Singular Inflection -s by a Japanese English Learner," *Academic Reports, the Faculty of Engineering, Tokyo Polytechnic University* 37, 2 (2014): 71-96.
42 Hoshino, 77.
43 Hoshino, 76.
44 Ehsan Namaziandost, Mehdi Nasri, Fariba Rahimi Esfahani, Mohammad Hossein Keshmirshekan and Juan de Dios Martínez Agudo, "The Impacts of Spaced and Massed Distribution Instruction on EFL Learners' Vocabulary Learning," *Cogent Education* 6, 1 (2020): 1-13. DOI: 10.1080/2331186X.2019.1661131.

groups in which 34 participants received Spaced Learning instruction, while the other 34 received massed instruction. The authors used an ANCOVA to analyze the data from both groups. In addition, a pre-and posttest were used to compare the scores of the groups. They concluded that "the spaced group improved on their posttest compared to their pre-test."[45] The authors affirmed that Spaced Learning has a significant improvement in vocabulary learning.

Previous findings[46] in the field of Spaced Learning support its effectiveness and positive outcomes in information retention and how it can eventually lead to long-term memory knowledge. However, less studies have been carried out in Spanish-speaking countries, and on morpheme acquisition and oral production in English as the language under study since research has been mainly carried out on the grammatical and lexical aspects. Thus, the Spaced Learning technique along with FFI, MFI, and a combination of both is proposed as a solution to address the lack of production of the third-person singular –s that most Spanish speaking EFL learners have, by seeking to answer the following quantitative research-type questions:

1. Does the Spaced Learning technique in combination with form-focused, meaning-focused instruction or a combination of these types of instruction help Spanish-speaking EFL learners with the oral production of third-person singular –s morpheme?

2. If Spaced Learning improves the oral production of the –s morpheme, which kind of instruction produces statistically significant differences?

The following section describes the research design, the data collection, coding, and analysis as well as a description of the instruments.

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45 Namaziandost and others, 6.
46 Such as those of Bloom and Shuell (1981), Son and Simon (2012), Castro-García (2014), and Settles and Meeder (2016).

Method

This research was quantitative with an experimental pre-, post-, and delayed posttest design. It involved three treatment groups and a control group. The groups were already formed since this study took place in a public high school. The groups were all randomly assigned for the treatment methods (FFI + SP, MFI + SP, and [FFI + MFI] + SP), along with a control group to provide a more experimental design. The oral production of the third-person singular –s morpheme represented the dependent variable whereas each of the treatment methods, the independent variables. Finally, internal validity was ensured by randomization of the groups and the manipulation of the independent variables. Its external validity was guaranteed by choosing a relatively broad population where the treatment could be applied in future populations without significant constraints.

Participants and Context

The participants were attending a public bilingual high school in Costa Rica. They ranged between 16 and 18 years old. Since the study involved four groups, each composed of 15 students, the initial sample population consisted of a total of 60 participants. However, some students did not submit the informed consent form or decided not to sign it. The final population for the present study consisted of 34 male and female tenth-grade EFL students. According to the Ministry of Public Education[47] tenth-grade learners are expected to reach a B2 English proficiency level, based on the Common European Framework.[48] Regarding the context of public bilingual high schools, students receive a total of 14 forty-minute lessons of English per

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47 Ministerio de Educación Pública, "Educar para una nueva ciudadanía: Programas de estudio de Inglés. Plan de estudio Liceos Experimentales Bilingües. Secciones Bilingües Español-Inglés Educación Diversificada," Ministerio de Educación Pública, June 2022, <https://www.mep.go.cr/programa-estudio/bilingues-ingles-espanol>.

48 Council of Europe, The CEFR Levels. Common European Framework of Reference for Language, June 2022 (CEFR), < https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>.

week. The sessions are distributed among the skills of listening and speaking, reading and writing, and literature.

To enhance ethical procedures especially for underage participants, specific procedures were followed: First, a letter of permission was sent to the principal of the high school requesting approval to carry out the study in the institution. Second, an informed consent form was provided to the participants in their L1, including general information of the research project, risks, benefits, confidentiality, and the researcher's contact information in case of concerns. Finally, a background questionnaire aimed to collect the participants' data: age, gender, names (anonymously coded), current and earlier English instruction since this is the only pertinent data required for this research.

Data Collection

Pre-Test

This study aimed to measure statistically whether the learners' oral production of the third-person singular morpheme was prompted due to the treatment received. For this purpose, it was necessary to select participants who did not use the *–s* morpheme at some or any level. The pretest was the instrument used to ascertain whether the participants had mastered the target structure before treatment. Based on the results, the participants who did not produce the morpheme in the recordings requested were selected, and those who used the structure correctly in every utterance received equal treatment to avoid differentiation, but they were not included as participants in this study.

Treatment: Lesson Plans and Materials

To collect data on the language form analyzed, lesson plans were designed based on the principles of each type of instruction (FFI, MFI, and the mixed) for further implementation in alignment with Spaced Learning principles.
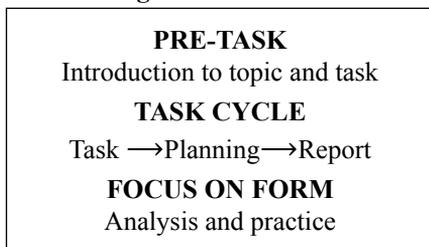
FFI Lesson Plan

Tomlinson[49] argued that the presentation, practice, production (PPP) and the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) are the typical lesson formats for FFI. De la Fuente[50] carried out research to investigate vocabulary acquisition, comparing the results of the PPP and TBLT; she concluded that "Task-based lessons with a built-in, planned focus on form seem to be more effective than PPP lessons (…). TBLT lessons designed this way can provide more opportunities for negotiation of meaning and output production (allowing focus on form) (…).[51] Therefore, the FFI lesson plan designed for this study followed the TBLT lesson plan stages illustrated in figure 1. In the pre-task, the participants used a picture to brainstorm ideas about the topic and performed an *Odd Words Out* game in which they identified the unrelated element in the wordlist. In the task, the participants watched a video about a bullying testimony and discussed it with guided questions. In the planning stage, they briefly reported what they discussed in the task stage, and the instructor focused on clarity, organization, and accuracy. In the report stage, two more groups reported their answers, and the focus was on the content of their responses. In the analysis, the participants read situations to identify the type of bullying and they had to infer why some words have the "**s**" in bold, e.g., *Jennifer sit**s** behind Ashley in Math. Every day she poke**s** her in the back of the head with her pencil lead.* In the last practice stage, they were given a situation for them to roleplay and solve.

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49 Tomlinson (2018).
50 María José De la Fuente, "Classroom L2 Vocabulary Acquisition: Investigating the Role of Pedagogical Tasks and Form-Focused Instruction," *Language Teaching Research* 10, 3 (2006): 263-295.
51 De la Fuente, 287.

Figure 1. Pretest

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PRE-TASK
Introduction to topic and task
TASK CYCLE
Task ⟶Planning⟶Report
FOCUS ON FORM
Analysis and practice
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Framework in the TBLT lesson plan (Willis)[52]

MFI Lesson Plan

　　　Suggestions provided by Nation and Newton were taken into account to design the MFI activities; they recommended meaning-focused speaking tasks such as descriptions, hints, and formulation of questions.[53] In addition, Tomlinson[54] argued that MFI plannings should follow the six Text-Driven Approach stages (see table 1) to foster communication and meaning building. Thus, this study considered Tomlinson's principles in the MFI lesson plan.

Table 1. Text-Driven Approach Stages

Stages	Principles
1. Readiness activities	1. Personal connection 2. Visual imaging 3. Use of inner speech
2. Experiential activities	1. Personal connection 2. Visual imaging 3. Use of inner speech 4. Affective and cognitive engagement 5. Use of high-level skills 6. Focus on meaning

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52 Jane Willis, "A Flexible Framework for Task-based Learning," *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching,* J. Willis and D. Willis (Eds.) (Oxford: Heinemann, 1996). 52-62 (52).

53 I.S.P. Nation and Jonathan Newton, *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking* (New York: Routledge, 2009) 3-220 (30).

54 Brian Tomlinson, *Developing Materials for Language Teaching* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 2-577.

Stages	Principles
3. Intake response activities	1. Personal connection 2. Visual imaging 3. Use of inner speech 4. Affective and cognitive engagement 5. Interaction
4. Development activity 1	1. Personal connection 2. Visual imaging 3. Use of inner speech 4. Affective and cognitive engagement 5. Interaction 6. Use of high-level skills 7. Focus on meaning 8. Purposeful communication
5. Input response activity	1. Personal connection 2. Visual imaging 3. Use of inner speech 4. Affective and cognitive engagement 5. Interaction 6. Use of high-level skills 7. Noticing
6. Development activity 2	1. The same as in *development activity 1*

Source Stages and Principles in a Text Driven Approach Lesson Plan[55]

In the readiness activity, the participants listened to a situation, and they had to talk about how this situation made them feel and whether they recalled a similar experience or anecdote. In the experiential activity, they watched the same video as in the FFI lesson plan, but they were prompted to create connections between their ideas from the previous activity and the situation experienced by Caitlyn. In the intake response activity, the participants went back to the first situation (readiness activity), to visualize what happened to Caitlyn and formulate an opinion about her. In groups, the participants also discussed their impression to the statement "I don't believe what Caitlyn says. I think she is overreacting to get attention." In addition, they read six situations and decide which type of bullying was occurring. They

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55   Tomlinson (2013), 110.

analyzed which situation was like Caitlyn's and justified their answer. In the first development activity, they used vocabulary provided by the instructor to create their own bullying scenarios. In the input response activity, they pretended they were counselors and guests on a live TV show. They discussed the situations they created in the development activity 1 as direct messages. In the second development activity, the participants were given a situation to roleplay in pairs.

[FFI + MFI] Lesson Plan

This test contemplated the combination of form-focused instruction (FFI) and meaning-focused instruction (MFI). However, neither theory nor previous studies describe specific guidelines for combining these two types of instruction. The most significant traits of each type of instruction were implemented in the lesson. The stages were the same as in MFI, but with some modifications in the activities and with direct emphasis on the structure and accuracy.

The readiness activity was the same as in MFI. In the experiential activity, the participants watched the same video as in the FFI lesson plan and were asked to create the connections between their ideas from the previous activity and Caitlyn's situation, but they had to create the connections using the simple present and were given an example: *Caitlyn lives in a digital era where cyberbullying is very common via social media*. The intake response activity had no changes. In the first development activity, the participants used vocabulary provided by the instructor to create their own bullying scenarios with the emphasis on the importance of using simple present tense. In the input response activity, they pretended to be counselors and guests on a live TV show. They received and discussed the situations that they created in development activity 1 as direct messages. The participants were also encouraged to review the use of the tenses and ensure accurate use. Last, the second development activity was the same.

Tests

The three tests—posttest 1, posttest 2, and a delayed posttest—were designed like lesson plans based on Spaced Learning principles and all three pedagogical approaches to elicit students' production of the third-person singular –*s* morpheme under conditions determined by these types of instruction. The posttests were applied immediately after each treatment. The delayed posttest was given two weeks after the treatment to measure whether the benefits of instruction held over time. The instruments were validated by considering the recommendations and approval of the instructor in charge of applying the treatments and tests.

The tests aimed to collect data from the participants and analyze their production of the third-person singular morpheme after receiving instruction. The tests required the learners to describe cyberbullying situations orally; the situations elicited the use of the third-person singular –*s* as illustrated in figure 2. The topic of cyberbullying is included in the scenario *Digital Realities* from the theme *Bullying: Danger Zones* in the Diversified Education program in the last years of high school.[56] In addition to the program contents, the CEFR descriptors[57]—taken from the study plan at this school—were also used to select the functions and outcomes that B2 learners should be able to achieve regarding oral production. Topics in which the third-person singular would be elicited were chosen. Some of the descriptors for oral production included: a. giving detailed accounts of experiences; b. describing feelings and reactions; and c. giving straightforward descriptions of familiar subjects within their field of interest, among others. All four tests included the objective of describing a bullying situation to a friend, a description of the activity, the instructions, and the vocabulary that the learners should use. The pre-, posttest 1, posttest 2, and the delayed posttest had the same format, but the bullying situation was different. For instance, posttest 1 dealt with a soccer player and the suggested vocabulary

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56 Ministerio de Educación Pública, 113.
57 Council of Europe.

was *traveling, embarrassing photos, posts, Facebook* and *viral*, while the posttest 2 dealt with a 7th grader and the vocabulary included *bullied, senior, money, lunch time,* and *pictures*.

The pretest in figure 2 was specifically designed for this study to cover program content (bullying) and is based on the CEFR descriptor in the B2 band, which entails giving straightforward descriptions of familiar subjects within the participants' field of interest and of experiences that the participants might use during their daily life in high school.

Figure 2. Pretest

Pretest: Describing a Situation	
Objective	The students will be able to describe a bullying situation to a friend.
Activity	Describing situations. Students read the vocabulary provided. They describe a situation to a friend about someone who suffers from cyberbullying.
Instructions *Vocabulary*	Read the vocabulary below. Using the words below, describe in a 1-minute recording, the cyberbullying situation James is going through. Record your answer in the audio recorder of your cellphone, or in Vocaroo.com. Attach your Mp3 file in the Teams assignment. *frustrated, comments, high school peers, sexuality, imposter account, online dating site, provocative bold messages, mortified and devastated*
Be sure to refer to how James feels, and to the specific characteristics of the situation by answering *how, when, who, what,* and *why*.	

The learners recorded their answers to the situation given using the Learning Management System (LMS) *Microsoft Teams®* and shared the file with the language teacher. The tests were given to the four groups of participants in the same way. Posttest 1 was administered immediately after the treatment to evaluate whether there was a change in oral production. Since the main principle of Spaced

Learning consists of re-studying information at different time intervals, treatment as well as a second posttest were administered again two weeks later. In the last stage, a delayed posttest was conducted a week later to ascertain whether retention of the morpheme and its oral production prevailed over time. The results of the pretest and the first posttest were compared to find whether there was an increase in the use of the target morpheme in oral production, and the results of the first and second posttest were compared to the delayed posttest results to find whether Spaced Learning was a determining factor.

Procedures

After verifying that the population selected was suitable for the study based on the results of the pretest, the language teacher in charge of the target groups received all necessary training prior to the administration of the treatment. The instructor was also provided with a teacher's package, which included a summary of Spaced Learning FFI and MFI, definitions, principles, and sample tasks to prevent confusion. To avoid the Hawthorne effect, the researcher did not perform observations.[58] A posttest was applied immediately after each treatment. To measure whether the benefits of instruction remained over time, a delayed posttest was given two weeks after treatment. Due to the nature of Spaced Learning, which implies restudying information after certain intervals, a second treatment and posttest were administered a second time. The data was coded and analyzed using appropriate inferential statistical methods.

Data Coding

This section describes the procedure for coding the data obtained from the assessment tests. The method chosen was *obligatory occasion*

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58   Alison Mackey and Susan M. Gass, *Second Language Research: Methodology and Design* (New York: Routledge, 2021) 386. They believe that it is important to avoid being an obtrusive observer since participants might behave differently. Maintaining objectivity, subjectivity and staying in communication with the instructor will help prevent the effect.

analysis. R. Ellis and Barkhuizen[59] explain that obligatory occasion analysis is the ideal method to gather data on how and to what extent learners have acquired a language structure. The authors clarified that obligatory occasion analysis was formerly known as *morpheme studies*. Thus, the production or lack of production of the third-person singular *–s* was analyzed in terms of present or absent. All instances where the target morpheme was produced were coded as present-appropriate (A), e.g., *she feels frustrated* or present-inappropriate; or (B), e.g., *they reports the crime*. Whenever the morpheme was expected, but it was not produced, the instance was coded as absent when needed (C), e.g., **Mario feel mortified*. All totals for each learner as well as the total for all learners in each group were tallied to be compared as an aggregate average. The recordings were analyzed and grouped; however, not all the recordings were transcribed in totality due to time constraints; only the excerpts of the instances for morpheme data collection purposes were transcribed.

Data Analysis

The results obtained in the pre- and posttests were analyzed to determine what kind of instruction fostered more accurate production of the third-person singular morpheme. A one-way ANOVA and a repeated measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used with the pretest results (time 1) to find whether there was a significant difference in the means between the three dependent variables: A (present-appropriate), B (present-inappropriate), and C (absent when needed). The data were entered in the statistical software *R* to compile the results. The following section provides insights on the results.

Results

First, a one-way ANOVA, as detailed in table 2, was performed to determine that all four groups—FFI + SP, MFI + SP, [FFI + MFI]

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59 Rod Ellis and Patrick Barkhuizen, *Analysing Learner Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 73. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/ijl/eck003.

SP, and the control group—were homogeneous. The results of the ANOVA revealed that in the utterances produced there was no statistically significant difference between the four groups in the time 1 pretest $(F(3, 98) = [1.89], p = 0.136)$. Thus, the null hypothesis is not rejected, and all the groups were the same.

Table 2. Analysis of Variance between Groups and Means, Time 1

Model	Df	Sum Sq	Mean Sq	F value	Pr(>F)
Pretest	3	8.66	2.887	1.89	0.136
	98	149.66	1.527		

* The p value is significant at 0.05.

After administering the treatment and the posttest 1 (time 2), posttest 2 (time 3), and delayed posttest (time 4), a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to note whether the groups were significantly different across times. The Pr(>F) value obtained showed a significant difference between the posttest 1 $(F(3, 98) = [3.4076], p = 0.0206)$ and the pretest, posttest 2 and the delayed posttest, as represented in table 3. That Pr(>F) value means that there was a change immediately after the participants received treatment the first time.

Table 3. Analysis of Variance between Groups and Times

Model	Df	Sum Sq	Mean Sq	F value	Pr(>F)
Pretest	3	8.66	2.887	1.89	0.136
	98	149.66	1.527		
Posttest 1	3	6.708	2.23617	3.4076	0.0206*
	98	64.311	0.65624		
Posttest 2	3	1.16	0.3872	0.428	0.733
	98	88.68	0.9049		
Delayed	3	28.3	9.434	2.287	0.0834
posttest	98	404.2	4.125		

* The p value is significant at 0.05

According to the ANOVA results in Table 3, there was a significant difference between production of the third-person singular

morpheme right after the treatment, but the benefit of instruction did not hold over time as the delayed posttest intended to measure. On the other hand, further post-hoc analyses were conducted to identify which instructional approaches produced significant results. A Tukey Test of post hoc analysis was used for this purpose, as seen in Table 4, in which *G1* is FFI, *G2* is MFI, *G3* is the mixed instruction group, and *G4* is the control group.

Table 4. Post Hoc Tukey Test Results

Groups	Mean Difference	Std. Error	*p*
G1-G2	0.000	0.220	1.000
G1-G3	0.389	0.247	0.396
G1-G4	0.567	0.215	0.047*
G2-G3	0.389	0.247	0.396
G2-G4	0.567	0.215	0.047*
G3-G4	0.178	0.242	0.882

* The p value is significant at 0.05.

The findings showed statistical difference between G1 (FFI)-G4 (control) and G2 (MFI)-G4 (control); in other words, the learners' oral production of the third-person singular –s increased in the FFI and MFI, but not in the mixed and control groups.

In general terms, these results suggest that a difference between the production of the target morphemes in the control groups compared to MFI and FFI, but further analysis should be carried out in future research. To answer both research questions considering the results obtained, the Spaced Learning technique helps Spanish-speaking EFL learners in the oral production of the third-person singular –s morpheme because the treatment groups FFI and MFI were statistically different from the other groups, but not from each other. FFI and MFI individually produced statistically significant differences, but not in combination.

Discussion

This study was designed to find whether the implementation of Spaced Learning in addition to FFI, MFI, and a combination of both prompted the learners to produce the third-person singular –*s* morpheme orally. The results of this study showed that participants in the SP + FFI and SP + MFI groups increased the production of the morpheme in their oral discourse in comparison to mixed instruction and the group that did not receive specific treatment.

Form-Focused Instruction

The findings are consistent with research conducted by Spada,[60] who found that the oral performance of learners who received integrated FFI (attention to meaning first and then form) was superior to those of learners exposed to the isolated approach (isolated attention first to form and then to meaning). In addition, the results of this study are in accord with N. Ellis,[61] whose findings supported implementing form-focused and explicit instruction so that learners would notice those linguistic features that are not salient. The present results also confirm conclusions drawn by Valeo,[62] arguing that FFI is an effective method for content learning when using modified input, tasks designed to draw attention to form, and corrective feedback. The superiority of FFI is justified by Jensen,[63] who supported the use of FFI due to its functionality of communicating effectively and overcoming rooted errors.

Meaning-Focused Instruction

MFI as well as FFI demonstrated to be statistically superior instruction methods confirming what Tomlinson[64] had stated in his theory and proposal of implementing a text-driven lesson plan approach

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60 Spada, 73.
61 N. Ellis, 93-120.
62 Valeo, 27.
63 Jensen, 75.
64 Tomlinson (2018).

instead of the typical PPP since it provides a more engaging experi-
ence that could foster interactional communication. The effectiveness
of MFI is also supported by the results by Szudarski,[65] indicating that
the participants' knowledge increased significantly when receiving
meaning-oriented instruction. Conversely, this outcome is contrary to
that of Long,[66] who found that MFI was not entirely effective since it
does not guarantee that learners would acquire non-salient linguistic
aspects. This author also argued that MFI was effective for fluency,
but not for accuracy. Unlike Long's findings, the participants in this
study were able to produce the third-person singular –s accurately.
Consistent with the literature, this research found that participants who
received a more Principled Communicative approach as Celce-Murcia,
and others[67] suggested would solve some of the common weaknesses
CLT has. The participants who were in the MFI + SP were exposed
not only to meaning-oriented activities but also to specific language
input to raise awareness of the morpheme.

Mixed-Focused Instruction

The findings here are contrary to prior studies which have sug-
gested that meaning-focused and form-focused instruction should be
complemented within a mixed-pedagogical approach. Mart[68] strongly
encouraged the implementation of both types of instruction, affirming
that learners could not be fully communicatively competent if they
received an exclusive approach. The results observed in this inves-
tigation are far below those observed in the research done by Mart,
where students who received mixed-method instruction were better
performers and more participative in oral discussions. In addition, this
study has been unable to prove the effectiveness of integrating FFI

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65 Szudarski, 3-37.
66 Long (1998).
67 Marianne Celce-Murcia, Zoltán Dörnyei and Sarah Thurrell, "Direct Approaches in L2 Instruc-
    tion: A Turning Point in Communicative Language Teaching?," *TESOL Quarterly* 31, 1 (1997):
    141-152. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/3587979.
68 Mart, 1, 26.

into the MFI as Jensen[69] affirmed since the participants in the [FFI + MFI] SP group did not show a significant improvement when producing the morpheme orally. On the contrary, Tomlinson[70] suggested the implementation of a text-driven approach so form and meaning were integrated. This differs from the findings presented here since the lesson plan for the mixed group was designed considering this approach and the results were not as beneficial as those described by the author.

Spaced Learning

The statistically significant different results were related to the type of instruction and were observed immediately after administering the treatment (posttest 1). The effectiveness of Spaced learning was to be measured based on the results of the second posttest and the delayed posttest. However, I did not find any statistically significant differences in the second posttest and delayed posttest. Thus, Spaced Learning is not a significant factor in this experiment. The results of this study corroborate the ideas of Bird,[71] who suggested that further study and evidence are necessary to affirm that Spaced Learning and intensive instruction can trigger accurate grammatical sentences. The results are also contrary to those of Hoshino,[72] who maintained that pedagogical practices to foster the acquisition of the third-person singular morpheme could be effective to a certain extent if combined with corrective feedback and Spaced Learning. Based on the results obtained, only explicit instruction and corrective feedback proved to be beneficial. One explanation for this might be that in studies that tested Spaced Learning vs. massed learning the treatment and control groups were distributed accordingly, but in this study all the treatment groups included SP.

The findings of this research have provided insight into appropriate, beneficial pedagogical practices to adopt in EFL classrooms

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69 Jensen, 75.
70 Tomlinson (2018).
71 Bird, 648-649.
72 Hoshino, 76-77.

when aiming to foster the acquisition of a specific linguistic feature. Concerning the first research question, it was found that indeed Spaced Learning combined with form-focused and meaning-focused instruction prompted the oral production of third-person singular –s morpheme. Regarding the second question, the combinations that produced statistically significant differences are FFI + SP and MFI + SP.

Conclusions

This study aimed to test the effectiveness of three kinds of pedagogical instruction: form-focused instruction, meaning-focused instruction, and a combination of both, complemented by Spaced Learning. The results showed that the learners in the FFI + SP and MFI + SP groups produced statistically significant higher instances of the third-person singular –s than those in the mixed and control groups. Implementing one of these pedagogical approaches prompts the production of this target morpheme.

These findings have implications for teachers since they would be aware of which kind of instruction—FFI or MFI—would be more effective in learning grammar in the EFL context. In addition, they would know different techniques for the application of these types of instruction in the classroom context. Thus, the results of this study can provide guidelines for instructors to overcome the ongoing challenge of how to teach one of last morphemes to be acquired by EFL learners according to Krashen's Natural Order Hypothesis.[73] EFL teachers should target the forms that they want to help learners produce, by testing and implementing appropriate techniques. A needs analysis can be performed since every group behaves differently, and their wants, needs and lacks vary although the learning goal might be the same. For the teacher who is trying to help learners produce the third-person singular –s in their utterances, the tenants of FFI or MFI should be followed, but not mixed.

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73 Krashen.

This study has certain limitations. First, the results should not be overgeneralized. EFL instructors should not ban the implementation of other pedagogical techniques or apply FFI or MFI exclusively. Other aspects such as the population, their proficiency level, and the linguistic structure targeted must be considered to approach the morpheme under study or any other language form. Second, the time of the study was too short to test the long-term results Spaced Learning can have in L2 acquisition. A longitudinal study can be designed to compare Spaced Learning and massed learning; more time is also needed to test the benefits of the technique in the long term. Finally, the participants did not always improvise their answers to the prompts; due to their intonation of the recordings, it was clear they were reading some of the information. Thus, future studies might gather the data *in situ* to ensure the conditions are as expected.

Numerous suggestions for future research can be provided. Several gaps in classroom instruction would benefit from the implementation of different techniques and strategies. During this study, it was observed that the participants who are in the B2 proficiency band (CEFR), according to the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education, are still not able to use the auxiliaries and verbs *do/does* or *have/has* accurately. I noticed that certain structures and collocations are usually translated from Spanish, and phrasal verbs are constantly misused. EFL instructors could target those gaps in linguistic accuracy and proficiency to investigate and test the types of instruction proposed in this study. It would be beneficial to test the Spaced Learning technique by having an experimental group and a control group from 7th to 11th grade to target specific difficult linguistic features and apply the tenants of the approach such as time and techniques. Results from a longitudinal experiment such as the one proposed would be valid and reliable. Furthermore, EFL instructors could investigate planning and materials development. Although the institution may dictate a specific approach to follow, there is room for variation and teachers can go beyond the PPP planning methodology by implementing the

text-driven approach and the principled communicative approach. Every approach has specific recommendations for each stage and diverse methods which can be used. Thus, EFL teaching and learning can benefit from the constant investigation and experimentation with different approaches and techniques.